

He Knew All the World's Most Prominent Men, But It Was Hard to Convince the People in Town.

CAMERA JOE

BY
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McNUTT

WHEN Joe Kelly was ten years old he was as dirty and tough as any kid of his age in the dirty, tough middle western manufacturing town on the banks of the Mississippi in which he lived.

He was the last and most neglected of the ten children who kept Peter Kelly, the freight brakeman, and his wife in debt and other trouble.

One summer day, at a picnic of the McHenry Plow Works Employees' Association, at Suttler's Grove, he saw Pete Moleksy, a boy of his own age, with a small black box in his hand.

"What you got?" Joe inquired.

"Camera," Pete replied.

"How'd you get it?" he asked wistfully.

"Bought it," said Pete. "Where'd you suppose?"

"Bought it?" Joe repeated incredulously. "Where'd you get the money to buy one of them?"

"Cuttin' lawns," said Pete.

The starter's pistol spoke, the runners leaped away, and Pete snapped the shutter of his camera.

"They don't cost much," he admitted. "A little one like this one I got is only \$3; that's all."

Joe trailed home with Pete after the picnic and, fascinated, watched him remove the film from the black box in the dim light from the red-shaded lamp and was it in a part of developer.

When the job was done Pete held the film up, and Joe saw, etched upon it, the scene he had witnessed in the afternoon in Suttler's Grove—the starter with the pistol raised, the runners leaping away from the mark. They were bad negatives, but to Joe Kelly they were the evidence of a miracle performed before his eyes.

THE next morning Joe was up and dressed before breakfast was ready. He ate hurriedly, rushed from the house, and ran across town to what was known as the nice residence district. By nightfall he had earned 50 cents.

He got home too late for supper, went directly to bed, and thought the matter out. At the rate he was going, it would take him five more days to amass the \$3 necessary to buy a little camera like Pete Moleksy's.

In the heat of his sudden overwhelming desire, five days seemed identical in length with 5,000,000 years, in that it was utterly impossible for him to wait that long.

Shortly after midnight he slipped out of bed and dressed. He slipped out of the house unheard and headed for the business section of the town.

At 1 o'clock a policeman cornered him in Knowlton's drug store.

"How'd you get in here?" the policeman asked.

Joe indicated a small broken tram car over a high door in the rear.

"What are you doing in here?"

"Lookin' for one of them camera things you take pictures with," said Joe.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Take pictures with it," Joe explained simply.

"I guess you won't need anything to take pictures with for a few years," said the policeman. "Judge Garvey'll send you to a place where you won't have any time to be taking pictures."

Then and then only Joe Kelly began to cry.

Judge Garvey committed him to the reform school until he was twenty-one, explaining to him that he might be released on parole sooner if he proved to be a very good boy.

In the history of the reform school to which he was sent, Joe Kelly's behavior stands as the record for good conduct.

AT the expiration of one year he was released on parole.

It took him nine days to amass the needed sum.

He didn't take the outfit home. He took it to a vine-masked cave in the side of a cliff on the river bank. He deposited his developing material there, set a corner of film in the camera, and returned to town.

All day long he wandered around with the box under his arm, but he did not take a picture. Early the next morning he started again. An intoxicated farmer was kicked out of Cutter's saloon. He got up to his feet and began cursing loudly. A policeman hurried up and arrested him. The befuddled farmer resisted in a futile drunken way.

Gathered in the front line of the crowd was Joe Kelly. He clicked the shutter of his camera for the first time.

It was a week before he used the camera again, although he carried it with him all the while. Then he made five pictures of various athletic events at a picnic at Suttler's Grove.

Gradually little Joe Kelly and his box became the subject of humorous comment about town. Some one called him "Camera Joe," and the name stuck. He discovered that there were cameras he had that would make better pictures, and started in to make money enough to get one.

Whenever anything happened in town Joe was there, to take a picture of it. Policemen chased him and cuffed him when he got in their way at the small riots that occurred when the employees of the plow works were on strike. Firemen stumbled over him and cursed him whenever there was a blaze.

When Joe was fourteen he got a job in the plow works and continued to spend all his spare time and money on his hobby. In the spring of his seventeenth year the big flood came.

Old Mississippi kicked up his heels, put his tail in the air and went on a rampage. The town in which Joe lived was inundated and cut off from communication with the outside world for two days and nights. They were days and nights of terror, death and destruction, and during those days and nights Camera Joe Kelly was busy as he had never before in his life.

He began taking pictures with the beginning of the flood. As the waters rose he salvaged his outfit from his home, carried it through the streets on the rapidly rising flood in a rowboat to a four-story stone and steel building in the center of the town and established himself in a deserted law office on the top floor. From there he sallied

forth and took pictures while the flood raged. At night he went out in his boat, constantly menaced by the swift-drifting wreckage that swirled about him, and took flashlights.

On the morning of the third day he was taking a picture of the wreckage in Main street when a tall, bored-looking young stranger with a big camera slung over his shoulder stopped and spoke to him.

"Who you with?" said the stranger.

"What?" said Joe, not understanding.

The stranger's eyes brightened.

"You local?" he asked.

Joe stared. It was all Greek to him.

"Are you a photographer?" the stranger said impatiently.

Joe nodded.

"Take any good pictures of the flood?"

"Sure," said Joe. "Lots of 'em."

"Sell 'em!" asked the stranger.

"Sell 'em!" exclaimed Joe. "Sure! You want to buy 'em?"

"Let's see them," said the stranger.

"Where are they? Come on! I'm in a hurry!"

Joe led him to the law office on the top floor of the stone building where he had camped during the disaster and showed him the prints and plates he had made.

The stranger was almost hysterical with delight as he went through the collection. "What'll you take for 'em—all of 'em?" he said excitedly.

"What'll you gimme?" Joe countered, amazed.

"Two hundred for the lot," said the stranger. "All you've got; every negative and print you've made while the flood was on. What do you say, kid? Talk quick!"

"Sure," said Joe stupidly. "Sure thing!"

The stranger stripped the money from a leather roll, handed it to Joe and began wrapping up the collection, muttering excitedly to himself the while.

"What's your name, kid?" he said as he prepared to depart.

Joe told him.

"Where you with here to town?"

"The McHenry Plow Works," Joe replied.

"Plow works?" the stranger exclaimed. "Come on along with me, and I'll get you a regular job!"

"What doin'?" said Joe.

"Photographin' you fool!" said the stranger. "Come on, talk quick! I got to be movin'!"

"Sure," said Joe.

"Come ahead," said the stranger.

A BREATHLESS scramble on foot and by boat out of the devastated town, a half-rattling dash in an automobile, a short wait in a station, and then the warmth and luxury of the Chicago express. Then through a crowded station to a taxi-cab, a rush across town, a trip up nine flights in an elevator, and Camera Joe Kelly entered for the first time the surroundings in which he belonged—the art room of a big city newspaper.

Within six months he was recognized as the best newspaper photographer in the city. His big, feature-ugly face, overlarge hands and feet, and skinny, strychny body were always good for a smile of recognition from the governor of the state, the mayor of the city, the chief of police, other city and state politicians, and big men of the business world.

From the beginning he demanded admittance to guarded places and ordered big men about with an air of authority that was both comical and compelling. He never fell down on an assignment. What he went after, somehow, someway, he came back with.

Within less than a year he became the staff man on one of the New York dailies. His circle of acquaintances grew wider. The President of the United States knew him and smiled whenever he appeared. Senators, representatives and cabinet officers called him by his first name; internationally known financiers dined and admired him. Prize fighters, ball players, actors and actresses posed at his curt bidding.

When he had been in New York a little more than a year, the world war began and he was sent to Europe.

For three years he roamed the warring countries in ill-dressed, soiled looking, tough, ugly and awkward as ever, "shooting" kings and queens, prime ministers and generals, living in the best hotels in the storied capitals of the old country, interested, however, in everybody and everything that was a good picture, and having no interest in anybody or anything beyond the picture value of the place or person.

When the United States entered the war he got a commission as captain in the Signal Corps. He made some battle pictures that are wonders, no more ruffled by bursting shells and whizzing bullets than he was by gold and great reputations.

Immediately after the armistice he got his discharge from the Army, but stayed on in France to cover the peace conference for an American news syndicate.

And then the booze got him. He had no rooted interests in life except his work, and in the intervals when he was not busy he drank; drank heavily, to escape the dull pain of boredom.

After the peace conference, and on his return to the United States, he cracked suddenly under the strain of dissipation; cracked wide open. He began falling down on assignments. He lost one job after another. The little he had saved was soon spent. He began sleeping on the park benches. He was a drunk on bum.

Jennie Potter found him early one morning alongside the railroad track just on the edge of town, only a few hundred yards from her home in Millertown, Ind. Her uncle came waving in answer to her screams, picked up the poor wrecked body and carried it to the house.

Millertown was too small to boast a hospital, so they laid all that was left of Camera Joe Kelly on the bed in the already overcrowded Potter cottage, and there Dr. Bowerman sent his broken arm and leg, and sewed up the nasty gashes in his back. And in that bed Camera Joe lay for many days before the doctor could declare with certainty that he would live.

JENNIE, the girl who found Joe by the railroad track, was the daughter



JOE FLUNG THE MONEY IN POTTER'S FACE. "THAT'S ALL I OWE YOU, AN' THEN SOME," HE SNARLED.

ter of Mr. Potter's dead brother. She was a stoop-shouldered, pinch-faced, overworked and underfed girl of nineteen, who did most of the work about the Potter place and took the blame for whatever was wrong.

Jennie was the first person Joe saw when he recovered consciousness. She came to the bedside and looked down, beaming at him. "Now, don't you fret! she commanded. "Don't mind what anybody says. Don't you fret. You just lie quiet an' get well, an' everything will be all right."

A few days later Mr. Potter came in an interviewed Joe. "Got a trade?" he inquired.

Joe nodded.

"I'm a photographer,"

"Photographer?" Mr. Potter sniffed. "I thought most likely it was something like that."

There was no photographer in Millertown. To Mr. Potter's understanding, a man who took pictures was in a class with gypsies, gamblers, medicine-show men, itinerant small samblers and others who lived chiefly by their wits.

"I'll tell you one thing, young man," he went on, with an angry note in his voice, "you're costin' us a lot of money an' makin' us a lot of trouble here. My niece went an' took you an' brought you into the house, leavin' her to be sick on us, an' when she gets so's you can be up an' around, you're goin' to do some honest work right here in this town to get the money to pay what you owe us before you skip out to do any more of your trampin' an' photographin'."

"You're a bright little sunbeam, ain't you?" said Joe. "You just shine right down through the clouds an' light everything up, don't you?"

"Well, I'm tellin' you what's what," Mr. Potter said sternly. "You ain't goin' to get away from here without payin' us back what you've cost us!"

When he had left the room his niece came in. Her brown eyes were stormy with anger, her lips were quivering.

"Now don't you fret," she commanded. "Don't you pay no attention to what he says. He's just as mean as mean can be. You just lay there an' get well, now, an' don't you fret!"

It was more than two months before Camera Joe was able to be up and move around freely. He came out of it weak and white and free of liquor poison for the first time in years. As soon as he was able to be about, Potter got him a job clerking in Brubaker's grocery store at \$12 a week. Potter collected the \$12. He charged Joe \$3 a week for this current room and board, and took the remaining \$9 on account on the bill, which he had made up for the time Joe had been ill in his house.

Early one evening, after he had been clerking at the Brubaker store some two weeks, Joe was stretched out on the front lawn, resting. Mr. Potter was sitting on the porch nearby, reading.

"This here Frenchman, Clemenceau, is a funny-looking fella, ain't he?" he said to no one in particular, "Picture of him here in the paper. He looks like some funny kind of an animal of some sort."

"The feller can talk English as good as you or me," Joe said idly. "Zat so!" said Potter.

"He ain't a bad guy at that," Joe went on musingly. "I sneaked in a vest-pocket camera, on day an' got a good shot of the old guy an' Orlando, an' President Wilson that I wasn't supposed to make. Wasn't a bad picture either. Run into this Clemenceau guy afterward at the Crillon, and he gave me a nice tumble on his picture I'd got. He had a copy of it in

his hand, an' when he seen me he come over an' shook his finger in my face, an' he says to me: 'That is a good picture,' he says."

"You like it?" he says to him.

"I do not," he says. "I think you should be shot for making it; but if I were the editor of your paper," he says, "I would think you should have a medal for it!"

JOE laughed reminiscently. Lying on his back on the lawn, he could not see the faces of his audience and did not realize the astonishment he had created.

Only Jennie believed. She sat forward on her chair, her lips parted, her eyes wide with the wonder of it.

At length Mr. Potter cleared his throat and rustled his paper. "I suppose you was real well acquainted with Gen. Pershing?" he said, heavily sarcastic.

"I don't doubt a mite that you've spoke to Lloyd George many's the time."

"Yeah," said Joe, yawning, not aware of the sarcastic intent of the speaker. "Pershing's hard. He ain't a bad guy. He'll stand for a picture when there's a gang to shoot him coming out of some big shindig or somethin' like that, but he's hard to do business with on any exclusive stuff. This Lloyd George guy's a dandy. He'll stand for a picture an' when he's at an event or do anything you want any time you catch him anywhere. He ain't a bad guy at all."

"Well, of all things!" Mrs. Potter exclaimed. Some of the children snickered.

Mr. Potter folded the paper and smiled grimly. "Of course, you're well acquainted with President Harding, I suppose," he continued.

"Sure," said Joe, still not catching the incredulity in the man's tone. "I knew him first in Washington when he was in the Senate. Then I was out at Marion with him for a few weeks round election time, an' down in Florida on that trip when he went fishin', just after he was elected, an' of course, he was elected."

He was elected, he went over to Columbus in an automobile to play golf. I went over ahead of him, and I was on the links waitin' for him when he come. He laughed when he seen me waitin' there, an' he says: 'Well, Joe, he says—'

It was as far as Camera Joe got in his narrative. Mr. Potter interrupted with a roar of laughter. Mrs. Potter and the Potter children chimed in.

Joe sat up and stared at them.

"I'll say one thing for you," Mr. Potter said. "When you start in to lie, you lie big. You don't tell me little lies 'bout knowin' the governor an' havin' shook hands with the President once, or anything like that. No, siree! You just swim right out where the water's deep an' splash 'round!"

Joe started to protest and stopped. He scrambled to his feet, shrugged and walked slowly, aimlessly, down the street, the laughter of the Potter family in his ears. A few blocks away Jennie caught up with him. Her small, pinched face was pale.

"Don't you fret!" she said tensely, falling into step with him and catching his arm. "Don't you care how they eat. I told them what I thought about the way they laughed at you. I don't care if they do give me a home! They're just mean, that's what they are. Just mean! That's what!"

Joe looked at her curiously.

"You're a funny little hick," he said with an air of casual patronage. "Did you believe what I said?"

She stared at him, eyes round with wonder at his question. "Why, of course," she said simply.

Joe laughed and squeezed her arm. "You ain't a bad little gal," he said. "Not half bad."

THEY walked together in the deepening dusk, and Joe talked to her; talked of places where he had

wondered at his question. "Why, of course," she said simply.

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THEY walked together in the deepening dusk, and Joe talked to her; talked of places where he had

easily forgotten. The President, standing on the rear platform of the shiny special, smiled and smiled. He not only remembered his face, but he remembered his name. "Hello, Joe!" he called to him, cordially. "Where have you been? We've missed you. I was asking some of the boys about you just the other day."

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